

Cross Purposes!

Jeremiah 15¹⁵⁻²¹; Psalm 26¹⁻⁸; Romans 12^{9-end}; Matthew 16^{21-end}

Give judgement for me, O Lord, for I have walked with integrity.
(Psalm 26¹)

When Jesus says, **If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me**, what sort of cross is this?

From the readings today you could put up a case that sees other people as the cross we have to bear:

- ✦ The Psalmist tells us how good he has been compared to all the others - **I have not joined the company of the false nor consorted with the deceitful** - and therefore the Psalmist concludes, **Give judgement for me, O Lord, for I have walked with integrity**. He is the best, the others are just a pain in the neck.
- ✦ Jeremiah is more blunt - he says **remember me and visit me and bring down retribution for me on my persecutors**. He asks this because he has been a faithful prophet - **your words were found and I ate them and your words became to me a joy** - but he does feel the need to point out to God that this was done at personal cost: **I did not sit in the company of merrymakers nor did I rejoice; under the weight of your hand I say alone, for you had filed me with indignation**. (Don't we all know Christians like that - the chewing a wasp sort who do indignation so very well?). Those unfaithful people around him are obviously the cross he bears!
- ✦ You could say that Jesus has to endure Peter - last week we read that he was the first to confess Christ and that he was the rock on which the Church as built. Now we discover Peter telling Jesus off for predicting his death. Jesus is blunt enough: **get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things**. Not quite a cross - that awaits - but a pain nevertheless!

How easy it would be if our cross were other people - we could easily get relief from carrying it: we could just avoid others and sit on our own in haughty smugness!

The life we have to **forfeit** is not the life with others, it is our own. The cross is ourselves - when we think that God should live to vindicate us rather than us sacrificing who we are for the sake of our Christian discipleship. This is why Paul is so challenging and uncompromising. I confess that in my preparation I was getting bogged down in the detail. Go home and read the passage in detail - it has a great deal in it that teach us about the cross you pick up as a Christian disciple:

- ✦ The Positive: **Love, mutual affection, hope, patience, perseverance, contributing to the need of strangers, bless, rejoice, live in harmony, live peaceably, feed enemies and give water, overcome evil with good.**

Being this positive is hard work - you can't do it as a lone individual and you can't do it without God's help. This isn't cotton-wool faith, it is a choice that puts others first, especially those you don't know and those you may not like! Love in action is always cross-shaped!

- ✦ The Negative: **no haughtiness, do not claim to be wiser than you are, do not repay evil for evil, never avenge yourself.**

Have you noticed that all the negatives are to do with ourselves - thinking that we are more significant or more important than we are. Crosses aren't vacant ornaments - and self-centredness and self-absorption mean that we are the sacrificial victim.

- ✦ The Neutral: **Vengeance** - that belongs God.

If anything belongs to a Christian who has abdicated dignity in crucifixion it is this - to be dead to knowing about, far less controlling, what happens to people who have done us wrong.

The trouble with crosses - principally because people were fatally attached to them - is that you can't put them down. You certainly can't put yourself down!